

## Assessment of bacterial load in the indoor air of a poultry house : evaluation of the performance of real-time quantitative PCR

<sup>1</sup>Rinsoz T., <sup>1</sup>Oppliger A., <sup>2</sup>Duquenne P.

*Institut universitaire romand de Santé au Travail<sup>1</sup>, INRS, laboratoire de métrologie des aérosols, 54501 Vandoeuvre, France<sup>2</sup>*

**INTRODUCTION:** Workers in poultry houses are exposed to very high level of airborne micro-organisms, which have been recognized as a cause of respiratory symptoms. Estimating the airborne bacterial load of poultry houses is a key point to evaluate the risk for the workers. Traditional culture-dependent methods to quantify and identify airborne micro-organisms are limited by different factors (short-duration sampling times, inability to enumerate non-culturable or non-viable bacteria). Consequently, the assessment of bioaerosols is often underestimated. To overcome this problem, the real-time quantitative polymerase chain reaction (real-time Q-PCR) has been used to quantify bacteria in environmental samples. The aim of this study was to evaluate the performance of a real-time Q-PCR method to quantify the bacterial load in indoor air of poultry houses and to compare it with another non-culture-dependent method: epifluorescence microscopy.

**METHODS:** The study was done in one chicken house and two turkeys houses. Four methods to quantify the bacterial load were tested, two non-culture-dependent methods and two culture-dependent methods: 1) Q-PCR, 2) DAPI staining and counting with epifluorescence microscopy, 3) sampling with an impinger followed by culture and 4) direct impaction on culture plates. For the Q-PCR and DAPI methods, bacteria were sampled during 3-4 hours respectively onto cellulose ester and polycarbonate filter using pocket pumps at a flow rate of 3.5l/min.

**RESULTS:** Impaction: due to the high number of bacteria in the air, the number of colonies was too high to be counted. Q-PCR: inside chickens house, mean +/- SD :  $897 \times 10^6 \pm 335 \times 10^6$  equivalent cfu/m<sup>3</sup> and inside turkeys houses :  $615 \times 10^6 \pm 300 \times 10^6$  equivalent cfu/m<sup>3</sup>. DAPI staining and counting: inside chickens house :  $582 \times 10^6 \pm 510 \times 10^6$  equivalent cfu/m<sup>3</sup> and inside turkeys houses, only one sample could be quantified with a value of  $16 \times 10^6$  equivalent cfu/m<sup>3</sup>. Impinger and culture: inside chickens house, one value of  $24 \times 10^6$  cfu/m<sup>3</sup> and inside turkeys houses :  $53 \times 10^6 \pm 38 \times 10^6$  cfu/m<sup>3</sup>.

**CONCLUSION:** The results from both non-culture-dependent methods are comparable. When the impaction method is inadequate for high numbers of airborne bacteria and the value obtained with the impinger-culture method is between 10 and 20 fold lower. Real-time quantitative PCR showed his ability to estimate airborne bacterial load. It could be used in other environments to monitor bacterial load.



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